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ABSTRACT

Noting that in Scotland there are a variety of provisions for preschool children organized and funded by different local authorities, private businesses, and voluntary organizations, this report describes the findings of a 2-year study into educational provision and day care for preschool children between the ages of 2 and 4 in Scotland. The study examined the variety of provisions for preschool; how preschool relates to the 5-14 program in schools; provision for special needs; and parents' and providers' views about quality. The research was conducted in the regions of Strathclyde, Fife, and Borders (three regions in Scotland) using a postal questionnaire, interviews, and observations. Main findings included the following: (1) costs and availability vary considerably among providers; (2) there was no common approach to keeping, using and having access to children's records; (3) for many children from minority cultures, there was no one at the center who shared their culture or first language; (4) parents and providers attached most importance to health and safety, and centers adopted various ways of assessing their own quality; and (5) the demand for pre-five services is likely to continue and expand in types of provision, learning and child-centered activities, special needs, and collaboration. A list of discussion topics is included. (AP)

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# INTERCHANGE

No 32

## Social and Educational Services for Children Under Five

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# Social and Educational Services for Children Under Five

**Janet Powney, Peter Glissov, Stuart Hall and Wynne Harlen**

*The Scottish Council for Research in Education*

*In Scotland there are about 326,100 children under four years old; just under a third are three and four year olds (mid-year 1992 estimates, SOED 1994). In the transition between the fairly enclosed world of the family and compulsory schooling from the age of five, many children experience care and education provided by professionals and voluntary groups. To provide a clearer picture of what happens to many children before school, The Scottish Office Education Department commissioned a two-year study into day care and educational provision for children in Scotland between the ages of two and four, a project carried out between 1992 and 1994 by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) in conjunction with Children in Scotland[1].*

## Background

Provision for children under five years old is a lively political issue and early education and care have been subject to scrutiny and change in recent years. The Children Act 1989 set out new regulations for the quality of provision outside school for children under eight years; it also extended the identification of children with special needs down from five to two year olds. HM Inspectors of Schools published *The Education of Children under 5 in Scotland* (1994). Early years experiences could affect the implementation of the 5–14 Development Programme. Regional guidelines are being published for ensuring quality of pre-five provision, although the impending reorganisation of local government in Scotland may bring organisational and policy changes. It was against this background that researchers investigated pre-five provision in Scotland.

In Scotland there is a variety of provision for children under five, some organised and funded by local authorities and others run as private businesses or by voluntary organisations — often with support from the local authority. The situation is further complicated by partnerships between some of these parties. Local authority provision is usually split into predominantly 'education' (nursery schools and classes) and predominantly 'care' (day nurseries and children's centres), emphasising different aspects of children's pre-school experiences.

## Aims of the project

The project looked at four main areas:

- costs and benefits for children, their families and providers in relation to various types of pre-five provision;
- the extent to which the aims of meeting the wider needs of children under five are compatible with educational demands of formal schooling (the 5–14 Development Programme);
- the provision made in different centres for children with special needs;
- how key people (parents and providers) perceive and evaluate quality in pre-five provision.

[1] Formerly Scottish Child and Family Alliance

## Research methods

The research took place in three regions of Scotland: Strathclyde, Fife and Borders. Reflecting the broad canvas of the research questions was an array of research approaches. These included survey work: a postal questionnaire to 1000 providers of different types of care and education (including registered childminders) for two, three and four year olds. The study also included more detailed work in 16 individual centres (day nurseries, nursery classes and schools, playgroups, partnership and private nurseries). This latter component of the study entailed a variety of research strategies: interviews with 50 staff and 59 parents (some based on photographs of children — including some with special needs — engaged in pre-school activities); the use of an early childhood environmental rating scale to assess facilities and activities across the different settings; observation of 28 staff (mostly nursery nurses) followed by reflective interviews; and tracking the activities of 127 children including the use of Ferré Laevers' involvement scale.

## Findings

### 1. Different kinds of pre-five provision (including costs and benefits)

Costs and availability vary considerably between providers.

***What information and guidance would help parents choose the most appropriate form of pre-five experiences for themselves and their children?***

*Shortage of provision*

- While day nurseries and some partnership nurseries provide a low cost service to parents, they are few in number; in some regions there are none at all. (At March 1992 there were 5684 places available in local authority day nurseries compared with 48,127 places in local authority nursery schools by September 1993.)
- Almost all day nurseries and around three quarters of other group providers reported having a waiting list for entry. In contrast, only 6% of childminders said that they had a waiting list. This may suggest some spare capacity within the childminding service.

*Costs and access*

- The costs of pre-five services to parents – other than snacks and meals – ranged from no charge (for example, in around 90% of nursery schools), to £3.50 or more per hour (in the case of two private nurseries). Seventy one per cent of playgroups charged from 80p to £1.59 per session; 93% of childminders and 81% of private nurseries charged between 80p and £3.19 per hour.
- The majority of providers, except playgroups, provided a service on five days per week. Weekend and evening service was rare, however. Day nurseries and childminders provided the longest daily opening periods and were most likely to provide a year-round service (80% of each reported this). Playgroup sessions lasted between one and a half to three hours. In the case of nursery schools, 42% reported operating on a school hours basis and 30% on a shorter day. Most places in nursery schools were for half a day only.

*Concurrent pre-five experiences*

- Shortage of full day provision means that working parents may make use of more than one kind of provision. Over half of the centres surveyed (as many as 75% of playgroups and 71% private nurseries) said they had children who attended at least one other provider. These alternative services were most commonly playgroups and childminders who apparently provide complementary services for parents using other groups, even private nurseries. Seventy per cent of childminders reported that they also took one or more children in their care to some other form of provision.

Many children attended more than one type of pre-five provider.

***What is the effect of multiple types of care on children?***

*Similarities and differences between providers*

- Most children attending any kind of provision were likely to have access to suitable facilities and a wide range of resources and equipment for promoting their social, emotional, physical and intellectual development.
- Evidence from an early childhood environmental rating scale indicated little difference between the kinds of facilities available to provide children with a variety of experiences and activities. The slight differences observed between playgroups and other providers were related to playgroups sharing accommodation with other services and whether or not a trained playleader was present.
- The environmental rating profiles for nursery schools, day nurseries and partnership nurseries were very similar in terms of space, materials and experiences to 'enhance children's development', their daily schedule and the supervision provided. This finding challenges a traditional distinction often made between day care facilities (such as day nurseries and community nurseries) and education establishments (such as nursery schools and classes). It has been assumed that care has been the main priority for the former and education for the latter.

*Benefits and disadvantages for parents*

- Many day nurseries (39%), private providers (37%) and childminders (30%) felt that the advantages of child care were that parents were able to go to work. Nursery schools were more likely than other providers to recognise their short opening hours as a difficulty for parents and a quarter of private nurseries saw their cost to parents as a disadvantage.
- In terms of formal mechanisms for involving parents, such as parent/teacher associations and management committees, private nurseries had notably lower levels of involvement than did other group providers.

Private nurseries had notably lower levels and day nurseries had higher levels of parental involvement than other group providers.

***Should pre-school services expect to involve parents?***

*Benefits for children*

- All providers emphasised the benefits for children in terms of enjoyment and development — especially the opportunities to meet other children and adults:

> *'We are not here as preparation for school, we are here because of the benefits that children can gain from pre-school experience. And there are benefits for school, but that's not the only reason that we're here.'*
>
> *(Nursery teacher, nursery school)*

## 2. Learning in pre-school and compatibility with formal schooling

*What is learned*

- Providers felt that the major benefits to children's learning were in terms of general social and emotional development and communication with their contemporaries and with adults outside their own family as well as the development of skills which would be useful to them later in life — in school and outside.
- Observations of 96 (mostly four year old) children in a variety of group settings showed that two thirds of time (62%) was spent in activities directly related to the primary school curriculum (the 5–14 Development Programme).
- The four most common areas of activity were: paints, crayons, felt tips, etc; preparing and/or eating food; story or poem read aloud; materials for construction. The four most common actions were: observing; describing; drawing, painting, modelling or printing; and asking questions. For as much as a third of the time, children were watching other people and activities in the centre.
- The level of involvement of children varied between types of provision, with the highest levels found in nursery school and playgroup centres and the lowest levels in the private nurseries. It is quite possible that this might relate to the age of the children and length of sessions, as nursery schools and playgroups tend to operate shorter sessions and have older children than in private nurseries.
- Staff said that they tried to create a learning environment which is compatible with, and extends, children's experiences in the home and the community. Pre-five settings buzz with activity and staff claimed their skill was in knowing how to support children's learning, when and when not to intervene.
- Group providers also suggested that pre-five experience would have benefits for children when they went to school since they develop their skills in listening (especially to adults), sitting still, and concentrating while surrounded by many other people and stimuli.

*Record keeping*

- There was no common approach to keeping, using, and having access to, children's records. This is an important finding given that many children attend more than one service and yet there is no means of tracking their progress between pre-five providers or from their pre-five experiences to primary school.
- Local authority providers were more likely to keep records than other providers. At least 25% of playgroups and 35% of private nurseries and childminders reported that they did not keep records.
- Although nursery schools were more likely than other providers to keep records of children's curricular progress, fewer than half (44%) did so; only one in five day nurseries and private nurseries, 2% of playgroups and none of the childminders kept notes.

There was no common approach to keeping, using and having access to, children's records.

*What kinds of records should be kept? And who should have access to them?*

*Liaison with primary schools*

- Some form of liaison with primary schools took place at almost all nursery schools and at around three-quarters of day nurseries but this liaison was predominately one way. Primary staff rarely visited pre-five settings. Fewer than half of private nurseries and playgroups reported any liaison. Liaison about the curriculum was reported by only 17 out of 300 centres.

Liaison with primary schools was almost all one-way, with few primary teachers visiting pre-five settings.

*How can primary teachers build on children's pre-five experiences?*

## 3. Meeting the needs of all children

*Minority cultures*

- For many children from minority cultures there was no one at their child care centre who shared their culture or first language. At least one in five group providers (39% of nursery schools) and one childminder looked after one or more child whose first language was not English. Only 14 group providers (around 5%) — mainly nursery schools and day nurseries — reported that any of their childcare staff were from an ethnic, cultural, or religious minority group.
- Parents and providers generally felt it appropriate and valuable to familiarise children with the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nature of today's society. Relevant curriculum materials, however, were not available in every centre and the researchers did not observe any activities related to multi-cultural or multiracial issues.

Few childcare staff were from minority cultures.

*How can pre-five settings develop a curriculum and approach relevant to Scotland as a pluralistic society?*

*Children with special needs*

- Day nurseries and nursery schools were more likely than other providers to have children with special needs; physical difficulties; learning difficulties and/or emotional and behavioural problems (Table 1). It should be borne in mind that very young children with difficulties may have priority for a full-time place in day nurseries.

***Table 1. Percentage of centres reporting one or more children with special needs***

| Type of special need | Nursery schools | Day nurseries | Private nurseries | Playgroups | Childminders |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Physical difficulty | 56 | 50 | 27 | 7 | 3 |
| Learning difficulty | 65 | 70 | 17 | 13 | 4 |
| Emotional/behavioural difficulty | 46 | 80 | 23 | 18 | 6 |

- Although many centres admit children with special needs, few staff were trained to support such children. Fewer than two in 10 centres reported having any staff with specialist training of any kind and therefore the children in most need are being cared for by the least qualified.
- The idea of integration of children with special needs was endorsed by parents, regions and providers. In practice this may vary from complete integration to merely being in the same building.

- Working with children with special needs requires collaboration between various agencies from health, social welfare and education, and parents. Inter-agency collaboration did not always occur in practice.
- A few children with special needs were observed and it is worth noting for future exploration that children with special needs did more activities which included adults and less with children than did other children. Their involvement was also more often described as 'above routine' than was the case for the other children.

## 4. Quality in pre-five provision

*Ethos*

- Parents and providers attached most importance to health and safety; activities which are fun; and adult:child ratios and relationships
- Staff and parents from all kinds of child care had similar views about the appropriate ethos for pre-five settings. They endorsed: a welcoming and friendly atmosphere in which people feel comfortable; happiness among staff and children; a setting that is cosy and home like; a place where all people are valued.

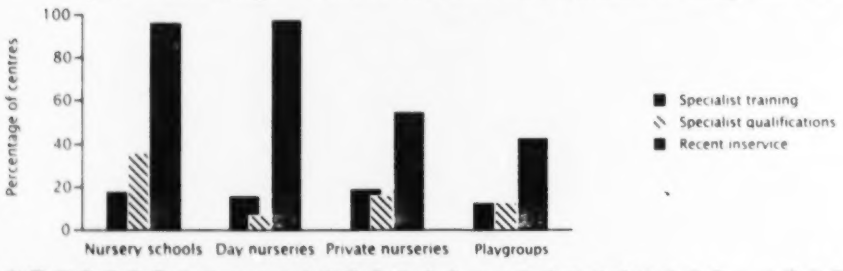
*Quality assurance*

- Centres adopted a variety of ways of assessing their own quality, including development planning, monitoring, meetings and inservice opportunities for staff — for example an internal review of staff–child interaction. HMI and regional support for nursery schools seems patchy; some had advice from their regional advisers/inspectors whereas others reported a lack of attention from HMI and/or their region.
- Under The Children Act (1989) regions are required to review provision; the first of these services has enhanced inter-agency collaboration and encouraged regional authorities to establish quality assurance procedures with guidelines to providers on how to implement those procedures.

*Staff training and qualifications*

- Staff with specialist qualifications (that is beyond the minimum professional requirements) were most likely to be found in nursery schools; over a third had at least one such member of staff (Figure 1). Fewer than two centres in 10 reported having any staff with specialist training of any kind.

Figure 1. Percentage of centres with staff with specialist training and qualifications



Forty five per cent of childminders reported having some form of qualification related to childcare.

- A majority of all providers wanted further support and training (79% of day nurseries, 72% of nursery schools, 64% of private nurseries and 51% of playgroups). Discussions with staff in 16 centres indicated diverse needs and priorities for further training and development and these reflected their personal responsibilities. For example, managers were more concerned with team building, curriculum development or administration skills, whereas junior staff aimed for more specific areas, most commonly for training and support in working with children with special needs.
- Childminders, playgroups and private nurseries had fewer opportunities to pursue training compared with staff in local authority centres.

Fewer than two centres in 10 reported having any staff with specialist training of any kind.

*How can staff best be prepared to cater for a wide range of abilities and special needs?*

## Implications for policy, practice and future research

*Different types of provision*

- The demand for pre-five services is likely to continue and expand. This does not necessarily mean maintaining the same types of provision but rather a variety of provision — part-time and full time, and opportunities for different kinds of experiences.
- Evidence from waiting lists, the survey and the interviews indicated that, overall, provision for pre-fives and hours of opening of centres are not sufficient to meet the current needs of parents. In particular, the needs of working parents need to be addressed to ensure that sufficient services extend beyond the normal school day and year, to cover evenings, weekends and holidays.
- The effects of multiple types of care outside the home for children in their early years need further exploration, especially the crucial role played by childminders.
- Integrated systems of assessment and record keeping are needed in pre-five settings and primary schools so that it is possible to track children who use different services concurrently, and as they proceed into primary school.
- This study only investigated those families who were using pre-five services; more needs to be known about the needs and preferences of parents whose children were not involved in some pre-school provision.

*Learning and child-centred activities*

- Scotland needs to have evidence of the mid and long term benefits, educational and social, of different types of pre-five settings and of the investment of substantial resources in the total provision for pre-fives.
- The relevance of pre-school activities to the 5–14 Development Programme needs to be clarified to allay the uncertainty of some pre-five staff about links between their work and formal schooling. Adults in pre-five settings place a strong emphasis on children's communication and social skills and these are necessary to learning at any age.

- This study suggests that the needs of children for whom English is not the mother tongue may not be being met.

*Staff*

- Distinctions between nursery nurses and teachers are often blurred in operational terms. This study found more similarities than differences in the experiences and activities provided for children in the sample of 16 nursery schools, day nurseries and partnership nurseries studied in detail.
- Staff in all pre-five settings (including childminders) wanted further training and staff development. What types of inservice training are needed, for whom and by whom, needs to be clarified.

*Special needs*

- Integration of children with special needs may be desirable in principle but the concept has many interpretations. Expectations of integration which can be built in pre-five settings with favourable child:adult ratios, may be unrealistic for primary schools with less favourable child:adult ratios. Models of successful and realistic forms of integration are needed.

Communication between agencies and parents was not always successful.

*What could be the most effective ways for regions to obtain parents' views and suggestions about pre-fives services?*

*Collaboration*

- The Children Act (1989) emphasises joint responsibility and partnership in designing and maintaining services through consultation with, and between, agencies and with parents. Mutual communication is not always successful and it would be helpful to identify the most successful ways in which parents' needs and preferences can be established.

*Maintaining and enhancing quality*

- Regional quality assurance procedures could, in the long term, improve the quality of pre-five provision. At the same time it is important to ensure that each centre is receiving adequate support and advice from regional and national advisors and inspectors.
- It is difficult to say, however, how robust new quality assurance procedures will prove to be after the reorganisation of the local authorities.
- Definitions of quality are tempered by the resources available, and the best deployment of those resources. Furthermore, what counts as quality in the 1990s may be regarded as quaint in a few years time. It is therefore essential to continue to monitor the appropriateness of definitions of quality and related policies as well as to evaluate their implementation.

## Full report of the study

Further details of the study are in the full report —*We are Getting Them Ready for Life: a Study of Provision for Pre-fives in Scotland* — available from the Scottish Council for Research in Education, 15 St John Street, Edinburgh EH8 8JR. Price £11.00.

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The Scottish Office Education Department who funded the study.*

**Points for discussion**

Information and guidance for parents

Effects of multiple types of pre-five care

Involvement of parents

Children's records: use and access

Liaison between pre-five provision and primary schools

Relevance for children from minority cultures

Specialist training for staff

Communication between agencies and parents

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